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Gregory Betts, Paul Hjartarson, and Kristine Smitka, eds. *Counter-Blasting Canada: Marshall McLuhan, Wyndham Lewis, Wilfred Watson and Sheila Watson*. Edmonton: U of Alberta P, 2016. xxxiv + 303 p. ISBN: 978-1-77212-037-0. \$49.95

- 1 If the catchy title *Counter-Blasting Canada* suggests something of the consistently lively tone of this multi-authored book, the subtitle, in which four names are juxtaposed without being linked, indicates the scholarly limits of this literary counter-blast. Within the covers of this handsomely-designed and beautifully-printed book, the accommodating reader (of whom, more anon) will find many interesting linkages between the inventor of Canadian cultural studies, the belligerent Modernist writer and painter, and the best-known couple in contemporary Canadian writing. The ten essays, each one well-written and interesting in itself, deal with an aspect of the work of at least two, and often three or even all four of these writers. Numbers matter in these studies: not only does an essay by Philip Monk play with this idea, but the delightful epigraph to the collection introduces us to the number grid verse of Wilfred Watson.
- 2 The main theme of *Counter-Blasting Canada* is the contention that the ideas underpinning post-war Canadian culture can be traced to the late influence of the

avant-garde Vorticist movement initiated by the two issues of *Blast* (1914, 1915). Through his work as an “experimental scholar” (31), with a “mosaical consciousness” (33) Marshall McLuhan developed the idea that Canadian writing and art had a duty to offer “a counter-environment defined by a heightened consciousness of the surrounding culture” (28), an idea which influenced a whole post-war generation of experimental artists, among whom the novelist and short-story writer Sheila Watson and her poet-playwright husband Wilfred Watson. The four-way conversation showcased in these essays drew in many of those involved in the late twentieth-century Canadian avant-garde and in particular experimental artists such as General Idea, or Bill Vazan (both well-discussed by Adam Welsh).

- 3 This central theme, clearly set out in the introduction which also offers a summary of the different essays, is then illustrated by at least twelve variations, for the ten scholarly studies are flanked by reflections on the past and future place of McLuhan within English studies. It is the discreetly dominating presence of Marshall McLuhan which, both historically and thematically, holds the collection together. While working in St. Louis during the Second World War, McLuhan attended the Wyndham Lewis lectures that were later published as *America and Cosmic Man* (1949). Returning to Canada, McLuhan continued to be inspired by Wyndham Lewis, as can be seen in an unpublished work entitled *New American Vortex* and in the debt which *The Mechanical Bride* (1951) owes to *Time and Western Man* (1927). He went on to supervise doctoral students working on Wyndham Lewis, most notably Sheila Watson. Working with Harley Parker, McLuhan published *Counterblast*, the chapbook of 1954 becoming a more lengthy work in 1969. Spanning McLuhan’s career from the 1950s to the 1970s, the conversation between Lewis, McLuhan and the Watsons on which, in their various ways, these essays focus, was clearly both productive and protean. To give just one of many examples, in what is in every way the central essay of the collection: Paul Tiessen looks at the letters exchanged between McLuhan in Toronto and Wilfred Watson in Edmonton, from 1959 to 1968, an artistic conversation which resulted in the co-authored work *From Cliché to Archetype* (1970). During this time, Sheila Watson was working on her thesis on Wyndham Lewis, and Wilfred Watson was busy transposing *The Apes of God* (1930) to the stage.
- 4 *Counter-Blasting Canada* is clearly an interdisciplinary book, and one concerned with the current state of the discipline of English Studies. In the concluding essay of the collection, entitled “Marshall McLuhan as Vanishing Mediator,” Darren Wershler ponders his personal experience of the failure of interdisciplinarity. On the one hand, he has found it impossible to persuade communication studies scholars to become interested in the literary content of a message and, on the other, literary scholars do not really take seriously the influence of technological change on literary form. Such considerations encourage us to think about the reception of this interdisciplinary work. Does interdisciplinary work automatically create interdisciplinary readers? To answer that question, we need to return to the endangered species mentioned at the beginning of this review: the accommodating reader.
- 5 The medium in which this Canadian scholarship is offered is that of a paperback or, if preferred, one of three electronic formats (pdf, Kindle, Mobibook). In other words, and setting aside the relatively minor differences between print and electronic forms of a text, the reader is offered a linear experience of a multiple entry argument. The alternative would have been to publish this collection as an issue of an online journal.

Online journals can be read from start to finish by clicking on the successive pdf links but, in contrast to the printed conference proceedings which they have come to replace, they are not primarily designed to be read in this way. Rather, they are accessed by key words being typed into search engines, a tabular type of access which encourages readers to go straight to what most interests them. Such an approach is anything but interdisciplinary.

- 6 On the other hand, the experience of reading *Counter-Blasting Canada* in the paperback medium offers the reader an excitement similar to that of a small and well-organized conference during which, because one has little choice but to sit through every session, one does not pre-select what one attends. The reward for such receptiveness is that an interdisciplinary whole may turn out to be greater than the sum of its parts. Specialists of McLuhan, Wyndham Lewis, the Watsons or contemporary Canadian culture could of course browse this collection selectively, but they would be ill-advised to do so. Great pains have been taken with the paratext so that complex essays can be read comfortably within a limited lapse of time. Such a reading exercises the brain in its capacity to remember, to trace patterns and above all to make connections, capacities little exercised in internet surfing. In short, the specialist accommodates the perspectives of other specialists, and so becomes the interdisciplinary reader at which this collection, among others, is aimed. As with all well-written works, the medium is indeed the message.

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Helen GOETHALS is a Professor of Commonwealth history at University Toulouse - Jean Jaurès. Her research focuses on the poetry and politics of the 1940s, and she is the author of *The Unassuming Sky: The Life and Poetry of Timothy Corsellis 1921-1941* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012). Her publications also include a journal issue she edited with Philippe Birgy and Wendy Harding, *Anglophonia, Carrefours / Crossroads* (33, 2013).